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THE USES OF MYTH IN *YOUNG* *MR. LINCOLN*

Abraham Lincoln is the great cipher in American political history. Beyond a few established biographical facts—his relatively humble birth, his histrionic confrontations with Douglas, his assassination—Lincoln's image is blurred in the American popular imagination, a mixture of fact and willed fiction. David Donald's speculation on Lincoln's underlying appeal is as true today as when he made it twenty years ago: "Perhaps the secret of Lincoln's continuing vogue is his essential ambiguity."¹ Virtually all popular portraits of Lincoln, nonetheless, are unambiguous in one important sense: whether he is pictured as a shrewd politician, folksy country lawyer, benevolent and wise leader, or "the man of sorrows," Lincoln is a figure who acts, ultimately if not always apparently, in the cause of goodness and righteousness.

This persistent identification of Lincoln with the good and the true continues to make his image an easily negotiable commodity. For instance, in a recent radio advertisement a solemn voice identifies Jimmy Carter with Lincoln's description of America as "the last, best hope for the world" and assures us "this is still true." Hardly one of our most Lincolnesque presidents, Carter still seems to be claiming credit not only for being and thinking like Lincoln, but also for keeping Lincoln's vision alive. Since Lincoln is usually invoked in times of trial and crisis, it was probably inevitable that the Carter media people should hit on the Lincoln parallel as a reminder to the

¹ *Lincoln Reconsidered: Essays on the Civil War Era* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959), p. 18. The title of Donald's opening chapter, "Getting Right with Lincoln," suggests a ritual that virtually all American politicians who aspire to higher office must undergo.